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Book review

By John Kelly (University of Edinburgh)

Marjoribanks, T. and Farquharson, K. (2012) *Sport and Society in the Global Age*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Sport and Society in the Global Age “explores the interactions between sport and society, focusing on the social, political, policy and organizational dimensions of these relationships” (p.2). It has three central and overlapping elements - societal processes, regulation and cultures, which are skilfully crafted as separate yet complimentary sections. The book can be viewed on two related levels – First, as providing a theoretical framework (social constructionist) for the critical study of sport and, second, as a substantive discussion offering rich, varied and knowledgeable topic-based and case study examples from the worlds of sport. The book is clearly aimed to appeal to undergraduate students on sports studies and sports management degrees who study socio-cultural issues in sport and is likely to be most suited to those in the early stages of their sociological careers.

The book is divided into four main parts sandwiched by introductory and concluding chapters. Part one focuses on theorizing and researching sport, specifically with two chapters devoted to theory and methodologies respectively. These chapters look at some key dualisms in sociology like consensus and conflict and structure and agency in addition to social transformation and the position of power. This is all highly appropriate and excellently outlined. Here, discussions occur around approaches to knowledge and how best to define, measure and analyse sport and society. While this may appear rather advanced at times; for instance, with ontological and epistemological discussions taking place, the authors skilfully navigate their way through some difficult concepts, enabling even the

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inexperienced student to follow. This key skill is demonstrated throughout the book, with potentially advanced methodological and theoretical concepts being simplified and applied for the novice. For example, in relation to theory and its importance, the novice is informed (and non-novice reminded) that theory not only provides “a means of explaining why things occur in the way they do in sport ... [but] also shapes the questions that we ask about sport, and the research that we undertake to answer those questions” (p.14). This neatly demonstrates the social constructionist critical framework the book adopts, alerting students to critically question the dominant questions when undertaking critical research.

Part two of the book deals with a number of social hierarchies, each set out in separate chapters focusing on ‘Race’, gender and sexuality, national identity and sporting bodies. Clearly in a book like this there are hard choices to make regarding what to include and omit. The authors have struck a nice balance by including the essential core sociological topics (‘Race’, gender and national identity) and opting to include what is a fascinating chapter on sporting bodies that includes discussions on drug use, pain and injury and cyborg athletes. There may be some who might have preferred to see disability included in the sporting bodies chapter (given the increasing work on and status of disability sport) or perhaps class, religion, or ethnicity discussed in this part of the book (with the latter two possibly being embedded in the national identity chapter). But these would be individual preferences rather than *better* choices one suspects. The end result is that some key social hierarchies are analytically discussed in helpful, interesting and thought-provoking ways likely to engage and enthuse undergraduate students.

Part three, on regulating sport, has three chapters devoted to clubs and governing bodies, the politics of sport regulation, and social justice. While the discussion of Manchester United and BskyB might appear old news, this case study represents a

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key moment in the politics of sport regulation and merits inclusion in an introductory text. The star of this part of the book is undoubtedly the sport and social justice chapter, not least because at long last social (in)justice is (thankfully) being seriously studied by sports academics as it simultaneously establishes itself as a ubiquitous yet equivocal soundbite of crowd pleasing policy makers and public officials.

Part four moves from a broadly structural theme (local and global regulation) to a more agency centred discussion of global sporting cultures. The three chapter part deals with the global athlete, the transformation of sports fans/fandom and the mediatisation of sport. Focusing on this interlinked trio of athlete, fan and media makes sense and offers a nice concluding part to the book. Here, we learn how athletes become celebrities and role models, with some pertinent questions raised around the legitimacy of this often 'taken for granted' process. The issue of migration and identity is tackled here too. Unsurprisingly, the final two chapters (fandom and media) in this part involve detailed discussions around technology and how it impacts, alters and guides the practices, behaviours and ideologies of fans, sports organisations, media and audiences. These two chapters are wisely placed together and they offer some overlapping content in clear and insightful fashion. These latter two chapters, in particular, will likely enthuse social-media friendly and technology savvy undergraduate students.

There is no doubt at all that this is an excellent book and will (hopefully) become a main source on undergraduate courses dealing with sport and society. It is full of excellent discussions each supported with a number of key sources likely to enable students to improve their literature reviews on each substantive topic. In each chapter the authors have clearly identified some of the main thinkers in each sub field and helped save students some time in their initial literature searches.

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Each chapter concludes with a helpful summary, discussion questions and a small selection of further readings, placing the book firmly in the introductory text range. These summaries, questions and references enable keen students to further their own knowledge and breadth of reading.

Although sociology is not in the title, the book presents itself as a sociologically driven book on sport. There are clearly sociological elements embedded throughout the book but there are times when policy and political analysis overtake sociological analyses and where sociological theories are absent. Given the overlap between these sub-disciplines, it is hardly a weakness as such, more an observation that the book is, as its title implies, more a sport and society (socio-political) book rather than a sociology book.

This is a thoroughly enjoyable read and when one enjoys a book so much, one can be confident of its quality and utility for students and tutors alike. The authors state in the introduction chapter that the central argument of the book is that "sport and society are in a constant and ongoing process of interaction" (p.2). On reading the book, this turns out to be rather understated if not modest. The book does much more than this. It is a rich and informative text that is sure to be useful to many students of sport and society. It seems appropriate to allow the authors the final word when summarising the central arguments of their own book:

"On the one hand, commercialization and commodification provide important financial and other resources that can potentially be applied by sporting organisations to social justice issues. On the other hand, the drive for profit maximization that underpins many of these processes may put pressure on social justice processes that could be seen to run counter to the financial concerns of sporting organizations and clubs. The ways in which these competing imperatives are managed in sporting contexts will be a

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critical challenge for individual sport organizations, and for more general understandings of the place of sport in society" (p.218).

This book is likely to help readers understand the place of sport in society. It has already become essential reading on my courses.

John Kelly